

WEST INDIANS IN GREAT BRITAIN*†

BY

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I have been asked by Dr. Campbell to read a paper on the problems of living in a mixed community, with particular reference to West Indians. The relationship of the West Indians in Great Britain to the M.S.S.V.D. depends on three facts:

(1) A movement of population, with its attendant problems, is involved.

(2) The migration is from a country in which the incidence of venereal disease is very high.

(3) It has recently been established that the increase in the incidence of venereal disease in certain big cities of Great Britain is closely related to the increasing population of West Indians. In June, 1956, a record number of West Indians arrived in Great Britain, and it is now estimated that a total of 75,000 West Indians in Great Britain is distributed roughly as follows: London, 30,000; Birmingham 15,000; Manchester 8,000; Sheffield 2,500; Leeds 3,000; Liverpool 12,000; smaller concentrations occur in Southampton and Coventry, etc.

History of Settlement in the West Indies

The islands of the West Indies form an archipelago stretching from the tip of Florida to the north-eastern tip of South America, and embracing a part of the Atlantic Ocean called the Caribbean Sea. Of the British possessions there, Jamaica is the largest island, followed in size by Trinidad, Barbados, the Windward and Leeward islands, and the Bahamas. They are mountainous, with a luxuriant growth of vegetation and many fast-flowing streams. For the most part, they are agricultural, producing sugar cane, bananas, and citrus fruits.

It was the great agricultural prospects of these islands that formed the basis of the slave trade which brought thousands of Africans and Indians to the West Indies to work in the plantations under English overlords. Before that time, Spaniards, Portuguese, and other Europeans had settled in the West Indies in small numbers. They found the inhabitants on the islands, the Awarak Indians who

originated from South America, living a leisurely life because Nature had endowed them with an abundance of everything they required. They were put to work by the Europeans and soon found that it was too hard for them; in resentment, they voluntarily drank the juice of poisonous trees and faced extinction. We then have one of the earliest lessons in West Indian history: that man will sooner die than live under certain conditions. The population complex does not end here, for, in the course of time, agricultural markets were organized in the West Indies and these brought visitors to the islands from China, Japan, other Asian countries, Syria, and North African countries. Many of these visitors found the climate very attractive and decided to settle there. Some of them became prosperous and invited relatives and friends from their far-off homelands, and so we find that to-day the population of the West Indies is a mixture of English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Indians, Africans, Arabs, and Jews. A tremendous amount of racial intermarriage has taken place, with the result that within the population there are all shades of complexion from white to black, Africans and Indians being the predominating racial groups. It is significant that, at the moment, there is a remarkable degree of racial harmony within the population, in marked contrast to the racial antagonism and hatred which are so well known in other parts of the world. This harmonious relationship marks the point reached 120 years after the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, a period which has witnessed a most interesting sociological evolution characterized by privileges due to class, colour, and parentage, and by strife and counter-strife, strikes and rebellions, and finally the birth of a party system with universal adult suffrage and self government. Now we stand on the threshold of Dominion status following our recent Federation.

Problems of To-day.

A few things mar the happiness within these naturally beautiful islands: poverty, squalor, disease, frustration, unemployment, and the other

* Received for publication May 23, 1957.

† Paper read to M.S.S.V.D. at Sheffield on March 30, 1957.

evils which follow naturally. The islands are economically poor because they are purely agricultural. West Indian politicians and economists are convinced that the only hope of cutting down mass unemployment is a policy of industrialization, and until this is achieved the West Indian invasions of Britain will continue. The West Indian population is at the moment increasing at a rapid rate and it is an extremely good thing for West Indians that the mother country has opened her doors to our emigrants.

In 1938, when we had a small revolution in Jamaica, four-fifths of the population were virtually unemployed and, among those who were gainfully employed, many only worked seasonally. Side by side with this unemployment problem, the rates of illiteracy and illegitimacy were noticeably high. As would be expected, these conditions seriously affected the schooling of children and the health of both children and parents. I am proud to be able to say that, since the upheaval of 1938, which led to major political advances in the islands, there has been phenomenal progress in economic and social development, thanks to courageous and far-sighted local politicians and the active cooperation of the British government. Notable instances of our progress are the establishment of a university college in Jamaica in 1948, with a present student population of about 700, and the development of many industries which are using the raw materials in the islands, *e.g.*, cement, shoes, linen, chemicals, and fish- and fruit-canning, and the processing of cocoa and the by-products of sugar cane. This is the trend which alone can stem the tide of emigration from the West Indies, so West Indians, despite their poor heritage, are now moving forward cheerfully and hopefully. In this spirit, able-bodied West Indians come to this country with the fixed intention of working hard, saving as much as they can, and one day returning to their homeland with a small capital with which to re-establish themselves. On arrival here they find the work they seek, but they face serious disappointment in the matter of housing accommodation and recreational facilities.

Problems Related to Venereology

I am in no doubt that these problems of housing and recreation are the ones which concern the venereologists, for they may be the social basis for the spread of venereal disease. Members of this audience are in a position to determine the extent, if any, to which West Indians bring venereal disease to Great Britain and possibly spread it within the country. I am certainly not qualified to make any statement of fact on this point, but I have

no doubt that others like Dr. Campbell have been studying the subject with interest.

I will attempt to throw some light on the incidence of venereal disease in the West Indies: In Barbados, with a population of 250,000, official figures for the year 1953-4 show that syphilis accounted for 6.7 per cent. of the deaths, of which 3.8 per cent. occurred after the first year of life. In Trinidad, with a population of 500,000, in one year, 40,000 applied for medical attention for the first time, 11.7 per cent. had positive blood tests, and 10,000 received hospital treatment. Many people realize that they have venereal disease but are so ashamed that they are reluctant to go to a doctor. In Jamaica there is a definite stigma associated with the disease; this seriously cuts down the attendance at clinics, and often those who attend them try to hide as much as possible.

There is an unfortunate amount of over-crowding in the homes in Britain, and the number of West Indian men is in no way balanced by the number of West Indian women. With colour prejudice as it is, we find that the West Indian men are extremely limited in their contacts with the opposite sex, so that the contacts they do make are with the worst type of women; this perhaps is a factor contributing to the spread of venereal disease. In this connexion, it is an interesting observation that there is a marked difference between "night life" in a city like Sheffield and in cities like Manchester or Liverpool, with the result that many West Indian men will leave Sheffield for a week-end stay in these other places.

Conclusion

I should like to appeal to members of this assembly to help in whatever way possible to ameliorate the social conditions of West Indians in Great Britain, *e.g.*, by countering colour prejudice, for this has its impact on housing. With regard to the formidable problem of housing, societies are now being formed in most of the big cities specifically aimed at assisting West Indian and other immigrants to purchase their own homes. Those who purchase shares in such societies, are making a contribution towards solving the problem of housing, which will help to cut down the spread of venereal disease. I think, too, that there is need for a special effort to remove the stigma associated with venereal disease in the West Indies. As a medical student in Great Britain, I have been impressed by the efforts which have been made to provide clinics where patients can be treated without publicity, and I would like to submit that this conference should aim at improving the situation in the West Indies *e.g.*, by reorganizing the methods of administration and by public education.